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Policy Implementation as a Tool for Advancing Equity in Community College

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Abstract: This special issue examines the role of policy implementation in the community college context and the ways reforms are enacted to achieve or advance educational equity.

In this introduction, we provide an overview of policy implementation, its current landscape within higher education, and the role it can and must serve for community colleges as a tool to advance equity efforts. The articles in this special issue provide a well-rounded overview of policy implementation efforts across various states and institutions. Authors examine promise programs, equity initiatives, articulation agreements, federally funded support programs, and race-conscious implementation. The community college context serves as a critical site of inquiry given that almost half of the undergraduate population is enrolled at a community college. Therefore, the following articles explore how to leverage policy implementation as a tool toward more equitable outcomes.
Keywords: policy implementation; community college; equity

Implementación de políticas como herramienta para promover la equidad en los colegios comunitarios

Resumen: Este número especial examina la implementación de políticas en el contexto de los colegios comunitarios y cómo las reformas logran o promueven la equidad educativa. En esta introducción, presentamos una descripción general de la implementación de políticas, su lugar dentro de la educación superior, cómo debe ser una herramienta para avanzar en los esfuerzos de equidad. Los artículos de este número especial brindan una visión equilibrada de la implementación de políticas en varios estados e instituciones. Los autores examinan programas de programas de promesa, iniciativas de equidad, acuerdos de transferencia, programas de apoyo, e implementación consciente de la raza. El colegio comunitario sirve como un sitio crítico de investigación, ya que casi la mitad de la población universitaria está matriculada en un colegio comunitario. Esta colección explora cómo aprovechar la implementación de políticas como una herramienta para lograr resultados más equitativos.
Palabras-clave: implementación de políticas; colegio comunitario; equidad

Implementação de políticas como uma ferramenta para promover a equidade na faculdade comunitária

Resumo: Este dossiê examina a implementação de políticas no contexto de faculdades comunitárias e como as reformas alcançam ou avançam a igualdade educacional. Nesta introdução, apresentamos uma visão geral da implementação de políticas, seu lugar no ensino superior e como deve ser uma ferramenta para o avanço dos esforços de equidade. Os artigos neste dossiê fornecem uma visão equilibrada da implementação de políticas em vários estados e instituições. Os autores examinam programas de programas de promessa, iniciativas de capital, acordos de transferência, programas de apoio e implementação com consciência racial. A faculdade comunitária serve como um local crítico de investigação, já que quase metade da população universitária está matriculada em uma faculdade comunitária. Esta coleção explora como alavancar a implementação de políticas como uma ferramenta para resultados mais equitativos.
Palavras-chave: implementação de políticas; faculdade comunitária; equidade

Introduction

The purpose of this special issue is to further understand the role of policy implementation in the community college context and the ways reforms are enacted to achieve greater educational equity. This issue contains five manuscripts that highlight educational reforms and their policy implementation in the community college context and how they relate to educational equity. The five education reforms include: tuition-free programs and their ability to deliver on their promise of access and equity; transfer articulation agreements and their benefits to racially minoritized communities; degree reclaim strategies that seek to improve the educational attainment of the "some college, no degree" population; programs that improve STEM completion; and lastly, the role of race-conscious leadership in policy implementation.

Our hope in curating this special issue was to generate critical scholarship to help us further understand the role of policy implementation to achieve greater equity in the community college sector. We focused on how policy implementation, an often-neglected element of the policymaking process, should be leveraged to achieve educational equity. It is also important to problematize the neutralizing of equity, which centers whiteness and white ways of knowing through color evasiveness in addressing barriers for racially marginalized students in education (Annamma et al., 2015; Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017). Specifically, because "education policymaking does not always lead to sustainable progress" (Harper et al., 2009, p. 389). The call to problematize equity is also a call to center and focus on the role of policy implementation and the actors and stakeholders that play a role in ensuring and dismissing the needs of community colleges. This criticality is necessary given that community colleges reflect a "national movement intent on fundamentally transforming an elitist higher education into a democratic and socially efficient system of advanced learning" (Pedersen, 2000, p. 124).

While community colleges continue to transform to meet the needs of students (Cohen et al., 2014), ultimately as a system, its foundation is rooted in providing greater access to communities and areas that were excluded from elitist higher education systems. As scholar-activists it is important we anchor our research on community colleges because they serve marginalized communities in metropolitan centers (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 33) and in rural communities (Koricich et al., 2018). In addition to attracting specific populations due to their locations, community colleges also provide educational opportunities that are more affordable and meet their workforce development needs (Cohen, 2014). Therefore, anchoring this special issue within the community college context and exploring the role of policy implementation in achieving greater educational equity implications is of utmost urgency.

Impact of Dual Pandemic

From the initial conceptualization of this special issue to its publication, we have witnessed historical events that have impacted us all. The dual pandemic of COVID-19 and racism has demanded us to reconsider the role of higher education and our work within it. We must also acknowledge that COVID-19 had a significant impact on the final outcome of our special issue, specifically exacerbating existing inequities in academic and publishing spaces.

The pandemic has disproportionately affected Black and Indigenous communities, and women of color in particular. Gonzalez and Griffin's (2020) report highlights faculty concerns about their ability to maintain research, grant, and publication activities. We shed light on the exacerbation of inequities for women of color and the double bind they exist in at the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and gender along with other social identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Ong et al., 2011). These

pandemics have sparked public scholarship that emphasizes how women of color encounter additional challenges in their teaching, service, and research endeavors (Malisch, 2020).

These dual pandemics resulted in some initial contributors from these communities withdrawing their critical work. Perhaps most disheartening was how the manuscripts these colleagues proposed brought a criticality that is urgently needed. We begin with a summary of the articles that comprise this special issue followed by an analysis of undergirding elements that comprise this volume--a historical overview of the policy implementation literature, policy implementation in higher education, community colleges, and equity and community colleges. We conclude with a discussion of the importance of these intersecting elements in our role as higher education researchers and implementers.

Summary of Special Issue Articles

As scholars, we are interested in the "promise" of policy implementation and the opportunity well-intended state and federal initiatives offer to address long-standing inequities in higher education. This is especially critical in the community college context, which has faced constant challenges to serving students equitably given historical unequal funding and expectations to enroll any and all students, especially minoritized communities that faced constant disadvantage in their educational trajectories. In this special issue of *Education Policy Analysis Archives* we called on scholars to center their work on examining how policy reform and its implementation in community college could lead to more equitable conditions for students. Our hope was to showcase research that critically investigated the ways policies are enacted in various settings to transform community colleges into more equitable institutions. Along with this introduction, the special issue includes five articles that explore topics like tuition-free programs and their ability to deliver on the promise of access and equity (Perna et al.), the development of degree reclaim strategies that seek to improve educational attainment of the "some college, no degree" population (Taylor et al.), how state-level transfer articulation agreements benefit racially minoritized communities (Worsham et al.), institutional efforts to implement new programs that improve STEM completion (Rodriguez et al.), and the role of race-conscious leadership in policy implementation (Felix). We highlight each article below and share findings and implications we believe are especially important to consider.

Will Free Community College Improve or Reduce Equity? Understanding the Forces that Mediate Program Goals and Implementation

The first article, by Perna, Wright-Kim, and Leigh, examines the implementation of promise programs across four community colleges. Using implementation fidelity research, the authors emphasize the importance of contextual conditions and understanding that community colleges may all be implementing a "promise program," but the results of these efforts vary significantly as they are influenced by factors like geographic location, campus demographics, organizational capacity, and leadership in place. Their work raises important questions about the design and implementation of promise programs and the ways these initiatives can be used to improve equity in community college. Through their analysis, they find that eligibility criteria, such as enrolling full-time or level of academic readiness, may restrict who has access and participates in these programs potentially inoculating the ability of free-tuition initiatives to reduce inequity in community college.

The findings drawing on implementation across four different states and over 153 interviews give policymakers and institutional implementers important insights into the enactment of promise programs. As the authors note, "to implement promise programs that improve equity, stakeholders should recognize how programmatic and organizational contextual conditions influence program coverage and content." Implications from this research highlight the importance of eliminating the

barriers to full participation and ensuring that promise programs support and serve underserved populations and work to improve conditions, experiences, and outcomes for students in the community college sector. Following the Perna et al. research calling community colleges to lessen the barriers of participation of the underserved population, Taylor et al. explores how the Degrees When Due initiative as a response to reengage previously enrolled community college students.

Unpacking Implementation Capacity and Contexts for Degree Reclamation Strategies: What Factors Move the Equity Needle?

Taylor, Rubin, Kauppila, and Davis examine the implementation of an equity initiative helping states and colleges increase degree attainment among the "some college, no degree" population. Degree reclamation strategies are efforts designed to help colleges identify near completers, reengage them, and provide supports to finish their remaining units to earn a credential or degree. This study centers on the Degrees When Due (DWD) Initiative which specifically supports colleges in building their capacity, infrastructure, and expertise to reengage students of color, adults over 25, and Pell-recipients. Drawing from the implementation experiences of seven community colleges in Michigan, the authors explore how varying levels of individual and institutional capacity influence the ability to successfully launch degree reclamation strategies and achieve their intended purpose.

Given the high concentration of racially minoritized, adult learners, and low-income communities served in community colleges, this study provides timely insights and implications for institutions seeking to reengage near completers. As the authors note, community colleges found to be more successful in implementing DWD reported having higher levels of individual and institutional capacity. In trying to advance equity in community colleges, the successful implementation of degree reclamation strategies can be one way to significantly reduce existing equity gaps in educational attainment. While Taylor et al. encourage community colleges to explore ways to reengage near completers who were largely students from racially minoritized, adult learners and low-income, Worsham et al. further explore the implications of the experiences of students from racially marginalized communities as it pertains to articulation agreements.

Opportunity for All? The Differential Impacts of North Carolina's Revised Comprehensive Articulation Agreement by Race/Ethnicity

Worsham, Whatley, and Loss examine the implementation of North Carolina's Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) enacted in 2014. These types of articulation efforts seek to decrease time to degree, lessen excess credit accumulation, and increase the likelihood of transfer and baccalaureate degree completion. A question researchers continuously ask is, if the articulation agreement is written in race-neutral terms, who actually benefits from these efforts? The authors employ critical policy analysis to interrogate the implementation of the policy and its varying impact for racially minoritized groups. Using a difference-in-differences analytic approach, the authors set out to examine if specific racial/ethnic groups like Black and Latinx are able to benefit from articulation agreements that seek to make transfer pathways more accessible in North Carolina. Their results find that the policy may have increased barriers to educational success, and associated economic mobility opportunities, among students identifying with certain racial/ethnic groups. Specifically, they found that the revised articulation policy may have increased time to degree for Black and Latinx students and increased excess credit accumulation for Black students.

This research serves as a reminder that policies designed, written, and implemented to "serve all students" may actually cause more harm to racially/ethnically minoritized groups, erasing the good intention with exacerbated inequities. The impact of policy and its implementation is crucial to

addressing equity in the community college sector from a race-conscious perspective, particularly if the goal is to address racial/ethnic inequality. For example, Rodriguez et al. research highlights that while reforms can enhance educational outcomes, they don't necessarily address inequality, specifically for historically marginalized communities, and scholars must critically assess reform outcomes.

The Influence of Policy Implementation in the Midwest: How an SSTEM Program Broadens Participation and Enhances STEM Identity for Community College Students

The fourth article in the special issue, written by Rodriguez, Espino, Le, and Cunningham, addresses the implementation of a federally-funded student success initiative at a midwestern community college. The Scholarships in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (SSTEM) program is a financial aid support program seeking to enhance student engagement, persistence, and completion in STEM fields. Directed towards community colleges, the program seeks to provide academic and financial support to low-income students in hopes of diversifying STEM fields. Using a phenomenological approach, the authors find that the implementation of the SSTEM program enabled student participants to have greater financial freedom and establish connections with STEM faculty and program staff. Students benefiting from the program also expressed a desire to have greater connections with the SSTEM program's four-year transfer partner university.

The results indicate that the implementation of SSTEM was successful in supporting students to develop their STEM identity and increase aspirations to transfer, but as you examine who participated and was positively impacted by the SSTEM program, it was predominantly white students. As scholars continuously document the significant barriers to accessing and persisting in STEM for minoritized communities (Espino et al., 2020; Malcom, 2010), participating in programs like SSTEM should not perpetuate the gatekeeping behavior that exists in these disciplines. The authors' findings express the need for implementers at the institutional level to be more conscious of how the enactment of federal programs may have differential impacts on racially/ethnically minoritized communities. Although the reform, as implemented, achieved its intent of improving educational success, the magnitude was limited by who actually participated. Using the policy as a tool to achieve greater equity falls on the individual to recognize pre-existing barriers to participation and actively working to recruit racially/ethnically minoritized students into these types of programs and ensuring that these students can benefit from these efforts as well.

For Latinx, By Latinx: Race Conscious Leadership in Policy Implementation

The final article in our special issue argues the need for race-conscious approaches to policy implementation, especially when reforms seek to address educational inequities in community college. Felix conducts an in-depth case study to document how leaders of color at one community college implement state-level policy reform known as the Student Equity Policy. This particular reform requires institutions to develop an equity plan that identifies student inequities, establishes goals for improvement, and proposes interventions that work towards improving parity in outcomes. Through the use of a *Trenza* Policy Implementation Framework that draws on critical, cultural, and rational theories, the author highlights the factors that empowered practitioners to see state-level reform in race-conscious ways and use the policy to target and address one of the most pressing issues in higher education, the inequitable rates of transfer for Latinx students.

Results from this study point to the importance of who the implementer is and how their identity, experience, and willingness shape their ability to recognize the racial possibilities of policy reform and carry out the implementation in ways that explicitly address racial inequity. Although

policies may seek to improve equity, they tend to be written in race-evasive ways that promote a "success for all" approach (Felix & Trinidad, 2020). As the author notes, "the eradication of educational inequity can only be addressed when racial inequality is acknowledged and addressed by practitioners through explicit and targeted policies, practices, and programs that are race-conscious." In order to use educational reform to tackle racial disparities, implementers themselves must actively draw on their racialized-gendered experiences, cultural intuition, and local discretion in ways that influence the enactment process to actually benefit racially minoritized students in community college.

Summary of Contributions

Our goal with this special issue was to encourage authors to place a singular focus on policy implementation in community college and interrogate the ways these reforms unfold to achieve their intended goals of addressing educational equity. The five articles illuminate the complexity of the enactment of policy at the institutional level and the myriad factors that may constrain or enable implementers in carrying out the vision for equity-oriented change. The pieces by Perna, Wright-Kim, and Leigh and Taylor, Rubin, Kauppila, and Davis examined how contextual conditions influenced the implementation of equity-oriented efforts like Promise Programs and Degree Reclamation Programs seeking to expand access, success, and completion in community college. Drawing on multiple institutions nested in different states and social contexts, their scholarship adds nuance and clarity to how political, organizational, regional, and cultural conditions led to varied implementation.

Worsham, Whatley, and Loss and Rodriguez, Espino, Le, and Cunningham highlighted the differential impact of race-neutral policy and its implementation on improving student success. Both the implementation of articulation agreements in North Carolina and the SSTEM program in community college illustrate the need for equity-oriented policies to be designed and written in race-conscious ways so that underserved communities can benefit from these efforts as well. In addition to race-conscious policy design, having race-conscious leaders overseeing and enacting policy is critical to using reform as a tool for equity. As Felix showcased, it is the convergence of good policy design, a supportive organizational environment, and individual leaders committed to equity that allows for educational reform to be used in ways that redress racial inequity. Taken together, these five articles in the special issue serve to expand our understanding of the forces that shape how policy is implemented in community college and the conditions that may allow for these reforms to achieve their intent of improving educational equity. In the next sections of this article, we detail the central elements that comprise the special issue: policy implementation literature, policy implementation in higher education, community colleges, and equity and community colleges.

Overview of Policy Implementation Literature

Policymakers and scholars alike have been examining how policy is carried out and what factors impact their implementation (Anderson, 2003; Lipsky, 1978, 1980; Matland, 1995; McLaughlin, 1987; Moulton & Sandfort, 2017; Rice, 2012). Policy implementation refers to how a law is applied and ultimately meets the desired outcomes of why it was developed in the first place. For varied reasons, how policy is developed through its lifetime towards implementation remains a labyrinth of power dynamics at every level (Moulton & Sandfort, 2017; Nienhusser, 2014, 2018). There have been various generations of how policy implementation has been conceptualized (Lipsky, 1978, 1980; Matland, 1995; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983; McLaughlin, 1987), theorized (Goggin et al., 2000; McCool, 1995; Montjoy & O'Toole 1979; O'Toole, 1986; Stewart et al., 2008), and understood (Lester & Goggin, 1998; O'Toole, 1996; Stoker, 1991). These generations of policy

implementation thought have helped us conceptualize and advance our understanding of policy implementation.

Top-down policy implementation, arguably the most common and perceived rational system of command and control, relies on those in positions of power and authority deciding how the policy efforts should be communicated and executed (Matland, 1995). While policies may be carried out with the best interest in mind, it may lack direct input and perspectives from those who will directly be impacted by such policy efforts is a common trait of the top-down approach. Notable in framing this top-down approach, Meter and Horn (1975, as cited in Khan, 2016) conceptualized a model with six variables that helped understand the policy implementation: "1) policy standards and objectives; 2) resources; 3) intergovernmental communication and enforcement activities; 4) characteristics of implementing agencies; 5) economic, social and political conditions and 6) disposition of the implementers" (p. 5).

Given this overview of top-down frameworks, we can see how policy implementation at every level is inherently biased (Felix & Trinidad, 2019; Young & Diem, 2018). The structures set and those who are tasked with carrying out policy efforts within these structures carry with them their own beliefs, thus, those with positions of power and privilege develop the policy with or without individual self-interest in mind (Matland, 1995; Meter & Horn, 1975). As higher education considers looking at why the needle has not moved far enough in equity work, we must pause and reflect who has led diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, who has played role in implementation of these initiatives, and how have impacted constituent groups at the *bottom* been involved if at all in policy implementation.

Bottom-up policy implementation starts within the constituent groups in the development and execution of policy efforts (Matland, 1995). This approach begins at the street level as Lipsky (1978) suggested, where two major factors impact policy implementation. Street-level bureaucrats in this process of implementation are arguably those who are "the last link in the policy-making chain", in our case higher education implementers (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff) interacting with other implementers and those who will be affected by the policy (Lipsky, 1980; Rice, 2012).

Street-level bureaucrat at a conceptual level is the engagement between implementers and constituent groups, thus where the policy socially materializes (Rice, 2012). In this bottom-up approach, there are two major influential factors in implementation, (1) the organizational context and (2) the street-level bureaucrats' values and beliefs (Rice, 2012). These factors interact with one another, where street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) are impacted by their organizational context at every level (i.e., local, regional, statewide, national) and their belief in the efforts trying to be carried out. Therefore, to maximize policy outcomes, a bottom-up approach must align with the goals, strategies, and activities that the people who will be directly impacted by the policy have identified as priorities and needs (Lipsky, 1978; Matland, 1995; Rice, 2012).

This process is contrary to top-down policy implementation and has been called "more realistic and practical" and "democratic" because it engages constituent groups, the people, who will benefit or be harmed from such policy efforts (DeLeon & DeLeon, 2002, p. 478). Yet, critiques of this approach have called for examining how then street-level bureaucrats are held accountable or not to the people they are claiming to support (Lipsky, 1980; Matland, 1995).

Both these top-down and bottom-up approaches, however, lack focus on the implementation point of influence, meaning the analysis of how the implementation is experienced by those from the *top* and those from the *bottom* (Stewart et al., 2008). Therefore, scholars have called for a third wave policy implementation approach, a hybrid of both top-down and bottom-up efforts that consider various vantage points in implementation (Goggin et al., 1990; Khan, 2016). This third generation of policy implementation aims to bridge the gap between the other two approaches by applying theoretical foundations of the ways in which top-down and bottom-up implementation

work (Pulzl & Treib, 2007). Khan (2016) argues that this hybrid model of policy implementation aims to provide a more scientific or process oriented method of understanding and measuring policy implementation.

Scholarship in the third-generation policy implementation is interested in how specific hypotheses are developed, how policy is operationalized, and "producing empirical observations to test the hypotheses" (Khan, 2016, p. 6; Pulzl & Treib, 2007). Instead of focusing just on who the policy is created by or the policy itself, this hybrid wave of policy implementation pushes scholars towards theory development, where policy implementation as a process is examined (Khan, 2016; Stewart et al., 2008). The "lack of theoretical sophistication" is one of the biggest challenges that remain for policy implementation scholarship, where scholars urge the need to expand towards beyond theory building to theory testing (Khan, 2016, p. 6; O'Toole, 2000, p. 276). The research that has moved towards adopting third wave policy implementation scholarship has largely remained outside higher education, an item that will be highlighted later.

Towards Centering Equity in Higher Education Policy Implementation

As higher education scholars we have done a subpar job in embracing the study of policy implementation, understanding policy implementation in our practice, and embedding criticality in analyses as key competencies of our profession. We must reimagine our roles in a way that situates us as policy actors with agency and understand we are active in the policy implementation process.

In all instances, policymakers, implementers, or those who are impacted by the policy become policy actors who play a role in the execution of policies (McLaughlin, 1987; Moulton & Sandfort, 2017). If we want to ensure policy efforts aimed at equity and moving towards eradicating equity gaps for minoritized students, there has to be a change in policy implementation. In higher education, there continues to be a paucity of policy scholars whose work focuses on how policy implementation impacts students, especially those from minoritized identities (e.g., Acevedo et al., 2015; Clotfelter et al., 2015; Felix, 2020; Felix & Ramirez, 2020; Felix et al., 2018; Gonzalez & Cataño, in press; Nienhusser, 2014, 2018). Furthermore, higher education policy implementation literature often frames minoritized students through a deficit perspective or focuses on the reasoning as to why a policy did not work. This lack of equity-mindedness in policy implementation analysis defaults to further harming minoritized students placing ownership of any lack of success on the student rather than holding institutions accountable.

Often, policy efforts conveniently disregard higher education's legacy of slavery, indigenous genocide, and exclusion of minoritized groups that leads us to our current higher education climate. We have moved across the semantics of, but not the actual root cause issues of equity, going from multiculturalism, pluralism, diversity and inclusion, equity, and racial equity. A critique that remains is that many of the efforts associated with advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education have been supported at a programmatic local level and not at a system-wide policy level. Additionally, the minimal equity policy efforts that exist have embedded in them the longstanding challenge with most policy initiatives, the ambiguity in the language and purpose that lends policy susceptible to inadequate implementation (Anderson, 2003; Matland, 1995; McLaughlin, 1987). This paired with continuous equity gaps provides urgency for us as scholars and practitioners on the importance of equity-mindedness as a framework to develop and implement policy with any type of sustainable outcome toward racial equity (Bensimon, 2007; Center for Urban Education, 2020; Felix et al., 2015).

Equity work in policy has been criticized for its diluted description, vague understanding, and as a result no real transformation in conditions, experience, and outcomes for minoritized students (Ching et al., 2020). This is critical in all of higher education, especially within the

community college context. This sector of higher education enrolls the highest number of minoritized undergraduate students and face multiple barriers to advance equity efforts for these students' needs due to organizational structures, funding, and multiplicity of missions all that are directly tied to policy (Boggs & McPhail, 2016).

Shifting Our Understanding of Policy Implementation

The higher education landscape is in dire need of a revitalized and deeper understanding of factors that shape how policies are implemented (Felix & Ramirez, 2020; Gornitzka et al., 2005; Kohoutek, 2013; Nienhusser, 2018). In this section, we argue that higher education scholars have largely neglected the study of policy implementation. We urge our discipline to reconceptualize the role of implementation in practice if we are committed to using policy as a catalyst to eradicate persistent higher education inequities.

Paucity of Research

Policy implementation in higher education has been largely understudied. A review of journal articles across three of the most cited journals in higher education (i.e., *Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, and *Review of Higher Education*) and those focused on the community college sector (i.e., *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *Community College Review*, and *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*) illustrate the dearth of research in relation to policy implementation. Between the years 2000 and 2019 across these six journals, a mere 40 journal articles contain the root word "implement" in its title (or 0.80% of all articles published in those journals; Authors' calculations using data obtained from EBSCO and Scopus databases). During that same period, only 5.64% of all articles published in those journals contained that same root word in its abstract.

This shortage of scholarship focused on implementation is especially pronounced in higher education journals (those not focused on community college) with only 0.36% and 2.56% of journal articles that contain the root word implement in its title and abstract, respectively. On the contrary, the community college journals analyzed are almost four times more likely to have journal articles that at least consider the topic of implementation (i.e., contain the root word implement in the title, abstract, or both). This analysis conveys an urgency for scholars, journal editorial teams, and funders to underscore research and its dissemination that focuses on policy implementation.

While O'Toole (2000) has argued that policy implementation research has "transmogrified" (p. 263), transformed and ever-present in disciplines, this has largely not occurred in the higher education discipline. This absence has been noted by some higher education scholars who argue for the urgency to develop policy implementation theories (Kohoutek, 2013; Viennet & Pont, 2017), understand political factors that shape implementation (McLendon, 2003), center societal inequities in implementation efforts (Ching et al., 2020; Felix & Ramirez, 2020; Nienhusser, 2018; Santelices et al., 2019), and focus on the role of policy implementers (Mapesela & Hay, 2005; Nienhusser, 2018; Viennet & Pont, 2017). This is an especially urgent call in the community college literature given the central role this institution-type has in implementing policies that can shape minoritized students' greater access to and success in postsecondary education (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020; Felix & Gonzalez, 2020).

Expanding the Research Landscape

We call on our colleagues (i.e., researchers, editors, funders) to consider and center the importance of policy implementation research in their work and decisions. Given the paucity of policy implementation research in higher education, we call on researchers to explore other

disciplines (e.g., environmental policy, K-12 education, organization studies, public administration, public policy) and international contexts to help us make deeper meaning of issues shaping US higher education policy implementation, especially within the community college sector. Furthermore, there is an urgency to emphasize policy implementation as a critical area of inquiry within the higher education literature. At times, researchers purport to be investigating policy implementation when in fact their scholarship is not centering that element in their work.

This expansion of the higher education research landscape should uplift the strengths of our community college systems, institutions, nearby communities, leaders, staff, and students while highlighting the challenges and opportunities they may face when implementing policies, as recipients of policies, or both. The absence of rich higher education policy implementation scholarship will continue to perpetuate this intellectual neglect and stifle our deeper understanding of this essential stage in the policy process that has material implications on our most minoritized communities.

In addition to a broad call for our discipline to more deeply explore this line of inquiry, there are specific elements of policy implementation that merit special attention, especially if our goal is to use public policies as a means to eliminate persistent higher education inequities. There are two elements that this special issue illuminates in relation to policy implementation in higher education— the importance of contexts (see Felix and Perna et al. in this special issue) and central role of higher education implementers (see Felix, Perna et al., Rodriguez et al., and Taylor et al. in this special issue) when unraveling and understanding policy implementation as an instrument to address inequities in the community college sector.

Policy Implementation in Practice

As former or current full-time higher education and student affairs professionals, we understand the critical role practitioners (i.e., policy implementers) have in addressing systemic institutional inequities. As such, we call for our higher education leaders and practitioners to critically reflect upon their current roles and shift their lens in understanding that they too are policy actors across the policy implementation process. With this in mind, reflect on how they support implementation efforts and implement policies while considering how to leverage those opportunities to address persistent educational inequities they face in their everyday work. Here we provide some recommendations for higher education implementation agents in relation to their role in leveraging policy implementation to meet an equity-focused agenda.

Higher education professionals are charged with serving as policy implementers, but we do very little to support their development and work as implementers or implementation agents. Inadequate support of our higher education colleagues may result in their frustrations associated with role conflict (when their personal and professional values misalign with their implementation efforts) and may result in burnout and departure from the profession. Perhaps most pointedly, our failure to support higher education policy implementers to envision their role as inequity disruptors we may miss out on opportunities to challenge the status quo and address harmful and persistent educational inequities.

A reconceptualization of policy implementation by higher education and student affairs professionals will first require an understanding of the significance that the execution of policies have in the policy process. More often than not, implementers' attention is on swiftly enacting institutional policies and practices without careful attention to how their implementation may have disproportionate negative impacts on our minoritized communities. There is a persistent push in higher education for consistency in how policies are implemented, allegedly for the sake of equality. In doing so, we have stripped away the agency policy implementers to meet policy objectives and

goals that can address inequities (Felix et al., 2015). Policy implementers, you have agency (Viennet & Pont, 2017). We urge colleagues in higher education settings, especially in community colleges, to exert that agency and resist policy implementation mandates that further perpetuate educational inequities. Instead, we urge our colleagues to re-envision how they implement policies to center minoritized communities' needs.

We recognize investments in various forms of capital are needed to center equity-centered policy implementation efforts. More institutional resources, primarily in the form of staff, are needed to implement policies. With dwindling federal and state appropriations to institutions, financial constraints have crippled higher education institutions (Mitchell et al., 2019). Coupled with that reality are the increasing federal and state oversight mandates that consume the time of policy implementers and likely take them away from envisioning more equity-oriented reform goals. Overall, we do a poor job in higher education institutions to consider the ways in which policy implementation can disproportionately negatively impact our minoritized student populations. We often rely on top-down efforts forgetting how these seemingly well-meaning intentions are executed (Martland, 1995). When strategizing implementation efforts, it is imperative that higher education policy agents carefully consider how such intentions may perpetuate inequities. Similarly, higher education implementers fail to consider how policy implementation can be leveraged to achieve equity goals. Such a re-envisioned implementation mandate would allow implementers to embrace policy implementation as a tool instead of a liability in their daily work.

Community Colleges

The mission of community colleges has been constantly changing over time resulting in debates on its purpose and role in U.S. society (Shaw & Jacobs, 2003). The evolution of mission and role of community colleges has ranged from vocational training to access points toward postsecondary education (American Association of Community Colleges, 1988; Boggs, 2011). Their geographical spread positions community colleges to be institutions of opportunity for various rural and urban communities that often have embedded inequities across policies in the educational pipeline (Nienhusser & Ives, 2020) Waters-Bailey et al., 2019). However, criticism has remained on how completion efforts are advanced through equitable practices to support minoritized students, such as first-generation, low-income, Black, Indigenous, students of color, and others (Felix, 2020; Nevarez, & Wood, 2010; Taylor, 2015). Across all sectors of higher education, community colleges continue to enroll the majority of undergraduate students, representing 89.9% of all undergraduate student enrollment (Espinosa et al., 2019; Johnson & Cuellar Mejia, 2020).

Given their open-access admissions policies, community colleges have been front and center in conversations of educational attainment for many students, especially those from minoritized identities (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Castro & Cortez, 2017; Nienhusser, 2014). Yet, literature has noted how constrained inclusion impacts persistence, completion, and outcomes for a majority of community college students (Negron-Gonzales, 2017; Sommer et al., 2020).

Structural organizational factors have historically impacted community college students' performance and outcomes. Overall, although community colleges enroll the highest share of undergraduate students (Espinosa et al., 2019), completion and outcomes remain scarce and drastically lower when disaggregated by race and gender (McNair et al., 2020). For Latinx/Hispanic students who started at a community college in the fall of 2014, 36% completed within six years and for Black students, it was 28% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). Although different states have invested in policy efforts to mitigate this and work towards closing racial equity gaps, scholars have noted the challenges that exist in implementing these reforms (Felix, 2020; Jenkins et al, 2018).

Racial equity efforts must continue to examine how implementation processes unapologetically address, center, and work towards advancing success for disproportionately impacted minoritized students. It is important to call out that minoritized do not complete at the rates as their white counterparts, not because of lack of aspirations and commitment, but rather due to the systemic inequities embedded in the educational pipeline (Aelenei et al. 2017; Huber et al., 2015). A recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center on undergraduate degree earners noted further disproportionate impact on community colleges enrollment and undergraduate earners due to the pandemic (Huie et al., 2021). There is no doubt the urgency to consider how we can reimagine community colleges recognizing the key role policy implementation will play in the ongoing shifts needed to support those students enrolled in that sector.

Funding at Community Colleges

One of the many challenges that impact community colleges' ability to advance initiatives is the sector's funding models. Community colleges receive funding from a variety of stakeholders; state appropriations and allocations, federal grants, and local revenue (Hoagland et al., 2019).

There are different funding methods used to determine the monies appropriated and allocated in higher education. Base-plus for example is where funding allocations are determined by increasing or decreasing from an existing *base* amount (Hoagland et al., 2019). Formula-based funding is where a formula with multiple variables as part of the equation such as full-time equivalent (FTEs) enrollment, institutional costs, or others are calculated and tied to the appropriations and allocations for funding (Hoagland et al., 2019; Li et al., 2018). Lastly, performance-based funding ties an institution's monies from state financial appropriation based on student retention and completion rates (Burke, 2002; Burke & Minassians, 2004).

Scholars across the nation have focused research on the relationship between these different funding models and their impact on minoritized students' success (D'Amico et al., 2013; Hu, 2019; Hutchison, 2018; Melguizo et al., 2018). Researchers argue that funding models are complex where sometimes a certain type of funding model benefits some and not others, which depends on the region, single or multidistrict campuses, and state. Through critical policy analysis (CPA) we must continue to examine various policy efforts to understand what addresses inequities. We are not surprised however by the fact that only in the rise of performance-based funding models that the longstanding inequities in retention and completion for minoritized students at community colleges have become a priority. The commodifying of equity efforts is a common practice across institutions of higher education, therefore we must question how policies impact our students at the margins. Our minoritized student's completion cannot only matter when funding is attached to their overall success. Community colleges are now being called to the challenge of ensuring they remove barriers towards completion for minoritized students in order to receive all or partial funding. This is great, however, it also possesses challenges.

It has been over ten years since the great recession where higher education institutions were financially hit, where the projected deficit for 38 states totaled nearly $105 billion (de los Santos Jr. & Sutton, 2012; Lav & McNichols, 2009). Now, about a decade later, COVID-19 has brought forward a new financial burden onto higher education. According to the Pew Research Center, higher education comprises only 2% of the federal budget but third-largest budget category in state budgets (Trusts, 2019).

This is key to consider as community colleges receive most funding directly from their state. Community colleges continue to remain as institutions under-supported that further translates into a direct disproportionate impact for minoritized students (Garcia, 2018). The COVID pandemic has

exacerbated these inequities once again for community colleges that receive inequitable funding juxtaposed with serving students with varying financial, academic, and social backgrounds.

This is exemplified by the initial Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding formula that punished community colleges for enrolling students who attend part-time or primarily via distance education that resulted in that sector only receiving 27% of the funding allotted to higher education (Miller, 2020). This was further problematized by the fact that these funds were only made available to those students who qualified for federal financial aid, meaning undocumented students would not be eligible for support although they are of higher financial need (Nienhusser et al., 2021).

In California, the community college system led by the system's first-ever Latino, Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley won a suit against the department of education for the illegal restrictions to CARES Act funding that impacted more that 800,000 students, including undocumented students (Zinshteyn, 2020). The CARES Act does not mention any restrictions on the classification of *student* eligible for funding, however the department of education played on the ambiguity of their bias and beliefs on who constitutes a student (Zinshteyn, 2020).

Updated figures from the Center for American Progress shared that as of late November 2020, institutions had applied for and received $13 billion of the $14 billion available CARES Act funds (Anthony & Navarro, 2021). This here is a great contemporary example of how as a sector of higher education, community colleges continue to be impacted by a variety of policies, stakeholders, and renders the need for research policy implementation through an equity lens.

Equity and Community Colleges

Anderson (2012) acknowledged that many researchers and higher education scholars are "somewhat oblivious" to the vernacular within the realm of policy work and as a result are unaware of how policymakers' beliefs and values are woven into not just the development of legislation but also in its implementation (p. 134). Therefore, the language and frameworks used in our research on equity and policy implementation is critical as many "higher education practitioners understand and enact equity along a continuum" (Felix & Ramirez, 2020, p. 6).

Stewart's Language of Appeasement (2017) highlights how frameworks matter, and it is important that higher education scholars are intentional about their questions and focus when researching policy implementation and equity. In both policy implementation and in higher education, researchers and implementers have fallen victim to interchangeably using diversity and equity. Specifically, policy implementation research often takes a quantitative approach with a diversity framework that "celebrates increases in numbers that still reflect minoritized status on campus and incremental growth" (Stewart, 2017, para. 7). From an equity framework when it comes to policy, we must collectively ask how can our implementation of policies reduce harm, revise "abusive systems," and increase support for individuals' life changes who have been historically excluded in higher education (Stewart, 2017, para 7).

While a number of policies have been implemented to increase access and address inequity, historically marginalized and excluded populations continue to experience barriers to access, degree attainment, and hostile campus environment (Arbona & Nora., 2007; Carales, 2020; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Hoachlander et al., 2003; Wassmer et al., 2004). Multiple scholars in higher education have identified this phenomenon as "the two-steps-forward-one-step-back cycle of higher education instructions" addressing issues of equity and justice (Patton et al., 2019, p. 118). In this work, Patton et al. (2019) emphasized how the majority of research did not reflect a critical paradigm when analyzing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that continue to primarily benefit white students.

In reflecting on this conclusion, how can we as researchers design, implement, and analyze policies outside of white ways of knowing.

Similarly, Harper et al. (2009) discuss how many policies that are race-driven are "embedded within mainstream, racist, and hegemonic frameworks that consistently question the worthiness of African Americans as educated citizens and the legitimacy of their presence in higher education" (p. 403). Ultimately, highlighting the need to address the "gap between critical policy studies and analysis and the development of a sustaining equity" (Anderson, 2012, p. 135). Therefore, given the aforementioned, policy actors from a local, regional, state, and national level are critical in supporting leadership, finances, and student outcomes for community colleges that all vary by state (Boggs & McPhail, 2016; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Some states have embedded policy reforms to address equity gaps, but often lack critical implementation efforts.

California, for example, has been at the forefront with their Student Equity Policy (SEP) to specifically focus on mitigating equity gaps for disproportionately impacted students (Student equity plans, Ca. Stat. § 78220, 2014). Similarly, Washington state proposed House Bill 2059-2019-20, which seeks to establish criteria for using appropriated funds to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals within the community and technical colleges of the state, therefore institutions would need to report their DEI goals and how they achieved these through the funds used.

Although community colleges have garnered attention from policymakers and the public, the momentum was largely lost during the Trump administration. Community colleges are looking at how they will be prioritized and supported given the nation's new administration and Dr. Jill Biden, First Lady of the United States, background in community colleges. With this in mind, why the exigent call for this special issue as a reminder that if not all, most of the policy implementation literature is within a larger public policy framework, minimally within higher education, and practically non-existent for community colleges. This crux of policy implementation within the community college context serves as a catalyst to focus on racial equity work that moves us towards eradicating equity gaps for minoritized students within higher education.

Conclusion

The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice have impacted all of us in various capacities. Over the course of these pandemics, we have seen the fragility of social infrastructures--healthcare, workforce, K-12 education, and higher education--inflict further harm on Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. These pandemics not only make existing disparities hypervisible, but further exacerbate the inequitable conditions and outcomes experienced by Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. According to the Economic Policy Institute (2020), during the second quarter of 2020, Black workers experienced the highest unemployment rate nationally, at 17.4%, Latinx/Hispanic workers at 16.9%, and Asian workers at 13.3% (Williams, 2020). Beyond economic loss, the loss of life due to COVID-19 has unsurprisingly impacted communities of color at disproportionate rates. Disaggregating the rates by race and ethnicity, deaths per 100,000 people, Black communities represent 168 deaths, American Indian or Alaska Native 163, and Latinx/Hispanic 144 (The COVID Tracking Project, 2021).

Now, more than one year after the COVID-19 pandemic started and campus shut-downs began, first-time associate degree earners numbers dropped drastically compared to the pre-pandemic rates (Huei et al., 2021). For example, first-time associate degree earners rates dropped by only 0.2% between April and June 2019 compared to a stark drop of 6.7% during the same months in 2020 (Huei et al., 2021). Furthermore, international students have also been severely impacted by increasing xenophobia and shut down protocols that impacted student visas and student funding (Harper, 2020). International student enrollment drastically decreased by 43% in fall 2020 (Baer &

Mirka, 2020). These drastic changes across various systems must remind us of how interlocking structures of power, privilege, and oppression play and reflect on our role as scholars and practitioners in advancing racial equity in praxis.

Amid uncertainty caused by the pandemic, higher education has had to pivot its ways of doing things at a rapidly ever-changing pace. A derivative of COVID-19 is the disentanglement of some systemic barriers towards higher education such as waiving of standardized testing (i.e. SAT/ACT, GREs) as admission requirements, access to resources (i.e., laptops and hot spots provided by institutions), and other online educational resources. However, for community colleges, the reality is that the pandemic has further impacted enrollment, completion, and transfer rates (Belfield & Brock, 2020). There is promise in how community colleges can bounce back and pivot to respond to this new online platform. For example, community colleges already have broader program offerings from online/remote modalities to short-term stacked certificate programs, which actually showed growth this year (Huei et al., 2021). Because community colleges are in tune with their regional needs, they will serve a key role in workforce development programs.

Although these are great changes thus far, it raises the question, why could we have not removed such systemic barriers that perpetuate equity gaps prior to the pandemic? It is here where we hope this special issue aids us in positioning policy implementation as a gateway towards that answer. Over the last year, the response or lack thereof to COVID-19 has demonstrated that when there is an urgency at all levels, policy processes move quicker. Our hope is that we can continue to re-envision higher education to address inequities through the thoughtful, creative, and intentional implementation of educational reform that leads to the full participation of all. We must continue to ask ourselves; how can policy implementation be a tool toward educational equity? The various pieces in this special issue all provide a jump-off point to examine the convergence of equity within policy implementation efforts at community colleges.

Lastly, we ask for you all to reflect on your disposition in this work. As we highlighted in our overview of policy implementation history, whether we recognize ourselves as such, we are policy implementers. Our intentionality and criticality to interpreting and responding to policy shape the possibilities for equitable change. Therefore, we must examine our own practices and employ critical approaches in our work if we truly desire to change the community college landscape for minoritized students. We must consider how exclusionary practices rooted in equality for all discourse harms the very students we often are trying to advocate for. Understanding the lexicon of policy implementation is key for all of us in order to position ourselves in ways that leverage our resources to advance equity efforts from our respective positions. We all have a piece in the process, and it is up to us how we come to activate our agency in order to critique, pause, and disrupt the inequities we encounter. How are you working toward equity-mindedness in your praxis? What would it look like to envision yourself as a policy actor in your work with agency? We hope you find guidance for these efforts in the manuscripts contained in this special issue, not direct answers, but guidance and perspective in moving towards racial equity through policy implementation in community colleges.

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